

CD 2012--13/14



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF MUSIC

University of Toronto Symphony Orchestra

David Briskin, Director of Orchestral Studies and Conductor

“Mahler First”

Thursday, February 2, 2012

7:30 p.m. MacMillan Theatre

Edward Johnson Building

2011-12 SEASON

University of Toronto Symphony Orchestra

David Briskin, Conductor

PROGRAM

King Tide (1999)

Anders Hillborg

b.1954

Anders Hillborg is the Roger D. Moore Distinguished Visitor in Composition

Blumine

Gustav Mahler

1860-1911

INTERMISSION

Symphony No. 1 in D

Gustav Mahler

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Program Notes

ANDERS HILLBORG (b.1954)

King Tide (1999)

James M. Keller, one of the most perceptive of writers about music today, pulled together a rich offering of metaphors from international critics, notably enthusiastic in tone, endeavouring to describe the visceral music of Swedish composer Anders Hillborg. All could be shaken and mixed, then transferred directly to today's piece: 'A seething sonic cauldron,' 'an aircraft revving up for take-off,' 'science-fiction robots being excited,' 'a softly shimmering and slowly changing sonic mist,' 'the sharpness of the Northern air, as well as a welcome brightness to penetrate the Scandinavian twilight,' and - from a critic who gave up trying to explicate a piece - 'indescribably wacky.'

The visual image is clear in *King Tide*, Hillborg's 14-minute atmospheric tone poem. A King Tide occurs when the sun and moon's gravitation forces reinforce one another, producing an extreme wave, beloved of fearless surfers and the stuff of folklore amongst indigenous cultures. Hillborg takes the image of a huge wave as a starting point in the dense, heavy layer of divided strings with which the piece opens. Punctuated by chordal bursts, like emerging patches of foam before the wave crests, the music gradually breaks into higher, lighter sonorities - pulsing and beating as though generated by electro-acoustical means. Multi-layered textures build in waves, surging and receding to a tsunami of sound (add this to Keller's collection), its crest impressive and inevitable, eventually ebbing to a single focal point of sound. The ensuing wall of dense sustained chords circles back to the opening before one final surge. Hillborg has acknowledged a debt in earlier pieces to the multi-layered writing of Ligeti. Holst might also come to mind at times, and some

of the minimalists. Throughout, there's an engaging play between the orchestral resources Hillborg writes for and sounds and textures traditionally associated with electro-acoustical sources and massed choral sonorities. *King Tide* was, in fact, preceded in Hillborg's catalogue by the original version of a wordless 16-voice *a capella* choral piece titled *muo:aa:yi::oum*, of similar length, structure and imaginative sonic palette.

GUSTAV MAHLER (1860-1911)

Blumine (1889)

Symphony No. 1, in D

(1884-88, rev 1893-96)

Background to Blumine and Mahler's First Symphony

The symphony, Mahler argued, "must be like the world - it must embrace everything." But it was years before Mahler was comfortable describing an orchestral song cycle (*Das Lied von der Erde*) as 'a symphony for alto (or baritone) and tenor soloists and orchestra.' His First Symphony, uncharacteristically long in its gestation, written when he was already renowned as an opera conductor, vacillated between the following:

1. 'Symphonic poem in two parts' and five movements (première in Budapest November 20, 1889)
2. 'Titan, a tone-poem in symphonic form,' - still in two parts, with five movements and a detailed descriptive program (subsequent performances in Hamburg and Weimar, 1893 and 1894)
3. The form by which we know it today, 'Symphony in D, for large orchestra,' - now in four movements, with no written program or further division into parts (Berlin performance, 1896).

The work was at first virulently rejected by audiences, scarring Mahler for life. The 'Titan' of the tone-poem version (still

frequently seen as a subtitle on recordings and in program booklets, though rejected by the composer) is not a reference to the powerful deities of Greek mythology but to the title and hero of a key novel in German literary Romanticism by Jean Paul (J.P.F. Richter, one of Mahler's favourite authors). In its four massive volumes, Jean Paul's Titan is a driven idealist, a 'heaven-stormer' with whose passion and conviction Mahler eagerly identified. Mahler's Titan experiences 'Nature's awakening from the long sleep of winter' through youthful joy, endless days of spring, and love to the sardonic black humour of a funeral march. Then, in the finale, Titan experiences 'a sudden despairing cry of a heart wounded to its depths' in a movement subtitled 'From Inferno to Paradise'. As Schoenberg, one of Mahler's earliest supporters, noted: "Everything that will characterise the later Mahler is already present . . . Here already his life-melody begins, and he merely develops it. Here are his devotions to nature and his thoughts of death."

Blumine (1889)

Blumine ('Bouquet of Flowers') is the discarded second movement of the earliest versions of Mahler's First Symphony. The only known score, lost until its rediscovery at an auction in 1959, is from the 1893 performance. The short movement speaks with Mahler's voice, eloquently, directly, quite without any trace of irony. Echoes of its melody remain in the broad second theme of the finale to the symphony. Reviewing the première of the First Symphony, critic August Beer described the *Blumine* movement as a serenade in which "we easily recognize the lovers exchanging their tender feelings in the silence of the night." The score was originally derived from incidental music Mahler wrote in 1884 for a theatre piece titled *The Trumpeter of Sackingen*, hence the prominence of the solo trumpet. The other movements of Mahler's theatre score are lost.

Mahler's First Symphony

The opening of the symphony at once establishes a canvas for Titanic struggle. Marked 'like a sound of nature,' a pianissimo A, seven octaves deep, evokes the deep stillness of the Moravian forests of Mahler's childhood. It is an awe-inspiring and utterly original opening to a symphony, with its slowly shifting light and rustle of wind broken by distant bird calls and bugle fanfares from the nearby barracks. As the scene comes into focus (Beethoven's Ninth was the obvious precedent here), a cuckoo call on the interval of a fourth (radical, even, in 2012. . .) leads straight to the main musical material of the movement. This is drawn from the second of Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* ('Songs of a Wayfarer'), a song describing the joy in Spring that a young man finds after the breakup of a love affair. The 24 year-old Mahler wrote the song in the wake of an affair with the singer Johanna Richter. Four years later, another love affair, now with the wife of the grandson of the composer Weber, generated the momentum to bring the symphony to completion in just six weeks. "It came gushing out like a mountain torrent!," Mahler wrote to a friend. The transitions within the movement are painstakingly structured and the music builds to one magnificent climax resonant with brass, then an exuberant, teasing close.

The interweaving of symphonic writing with melody drawn from song continues in the second movement. This is an intensely Austrian *ländler*, based on Mahler's early song *Hans und Grete* from 1880. The music is, for the most part, all innocence and happiness, save for a touch of sarcasm from the high woodwinds in the trio. If the movement was calculated to please its early audiences, the sardonic funeral march that follows only unsettled them. Taking its cue, in part from a woodcut engraving titled *The Huntsman's Funeral* in which

forest animals accompany a dead hunter's coffin to its grave, the macabre music builds a round on the nursery tune we know as *Frère Jacques* but which begins, for German audiences, with the words 'Brother Martin, are you sleeping?' Fragments of village band *klezmer* music add to the macabre scene. But hidden within the procession, at the heart of Mahler's First Symphony, lies an exquisitely scored excerpt from the last of the *Wayfarer* songs, a farewell to the world from a lovelorn young man.

The longest movement of the symphony, the monumental finale, still lies ahead and, with it, the transformation of musical material from earlier in the symphony. The music drama begins spectacularly with 'the sudden despairing cry of a heart wounded to its depths.' It now begins a progression from uncertainty

and despair to eventual triumph, moving through one of Mahler's broadest, most inspired melodies to reminiscences of the opening 'dawn' music and still more struggle. All the while, Mahler is working towards re-establishing the home key of the symphony, D major, not heard since the end of the first movement. A sudden upward jolt of tonality, triple-*forte*, begins the process. But uncertainty prevails as Mahler again works his way through the opening material and still more struggle until victory is within sight. Now, at the peak of the jubilation, the seven horns are asked to stand and let their chorale resound over everything. Mahler's Titan has finally fought through to arrive in Paradise.

— Notes © 2012 Keith Horner. Comments welcomed: khnotes@sympatico.ca

Biographies

ANDERS HILLBORG gained his first musical experience singing in choirs and he was also involved in various forms of improvised music. From 1976 to 1982 he studied counterpoint, composition and electronic music at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, where his teachers included Gunnar Bucht, Lars-Erik Rosell, Arne Mellnäs and Pär Lindgren. Brian Ferneyhough, who was a guest lecturer at the College of Music on several occasions, was also an important source of inspiration. Apart from occasional teaching positions, Hillborg has been a full-time freelance composer since 1982. His sphere of activity is extensive, covering orchestral, choral and chamber music as well as music for films and pop music. Anders Hillborg's orchestral music has been performed by many major conductors including Esa-Pekka Salonen, Alan Gilbert, Gustavo Dudamel, David Zinman, Andrey Boreyko, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Michael Gielen, Leif Segerstam,

Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Susanna Mälkki, Hannu Lintu, John Storgårds and many others. Orchestras that have performed his music include Los Angeles Philharmonic, Berlin Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, San Francisco Symphony, Tonhalle Orchester Zürich, Bayerische Rundfunk Orchester, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Swedish Radio Orchestra, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic, Bergen Philharmonie, Helsinki Philharmonic. He has received commissions from leading performing organisations such as Los Angeles Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Berlin Philharmonic, Tonhalle Zürich, New York Philharmonic, Carnegie Hall, Swedish Radio Orchestra, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Gothenburg Symphony. Other notable musicians he's worked with include clarinetist Martin Fröst, mezzo soprano Anne Sofie von Otter, choir conductor Eric Ericson.

DAVID BRISKIN, a conductor renowned for the versatility of his repertoire and the depth of his musical interpretations, was appointed Director of Orchestral Studies and Conductor of the University of Toronto Symphony Orchestra in July 2008, and has been Music Director and Principal Conductor of The National Ballet of Canada since 2006. Prior to moving to Toronto, Mr. Briskin lived and worked for 23 years as a conductor and educator in New York City. For seven years, Mr. Briskin served as Conductor with American Ballet Theatre, leading performances at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York's City Center and in major opera houses throughout Europe, Asia and the Americas. He is a frequent guest conductor with such companies as New York City Ballet, San Francisco Ballet and Houston Ballet, among others. For three seasons, Mr. Briskin served as Music Director for Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre and served as conductor for The Juilliard School's Dance Division from 1993 to 2005.

In addition to his work in dance, Mr. Briskin has enjoyed great success on the concert stage. He has conducted the Pittsburgh, Detroit, Baltimore, Indianapolis, Syracuse, Akron, Cincinnati Pops and Singapore Symphony Orchestras; the Hong Kong Philharmonic, the Juilliard Symphony and the National Symphony Orchestra of Costa Rica, among others.

For six years he served as the Music Director of the 150-voice Masterwork Chorus and Orchestra in New York, a tenure highlighted by annual performances at Carnegie Hall.

Mr. Briskin's opera schedule has taken him throughout the U.S. and Canada including performances with such companies as Calgary Opera, Manitoba Opera, Opera Carolina, Lake George Opera and Sarasota Opera. He has also collaborated with the Orchestra of St. Luke's in New York, creating and

conducting productions for their highly acclaimed Arts in Education series, and served on the faculty of the International Vocal Arts Institute in Tel Aviv from 1999-2005.

Over the years Mr. Briskin has been extremely active in arts education. For three seasons he was Artistic Coordinator and Host of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's Education Concerts. He has given lectures for the Caramoor Summer Music Festival, the National Society of Arts and Letters and the Conductor's Guild and has participated on panels for the American Symphony Orchestra League and Chamber Music America. He has served on the faculties of Queens College, CUNY, the 92nd Street Y and the Mannes College of Music and had a ten-year association with Lincoln Center Institute for Aesthetic Education. Mr. Briskin attended the Indiana University School of Music where he studied voice, piano and choral conducting. He holds a Bachelor of Music degree in orchestral conducting from the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and a Master of Arts degree in conducting from Queens College, City University of New York.

DEBORAH KIRSHNER was born in Montreal. She has spent her adult life as a professional violinist, graduating in performance from U of T in 1976. She then went on to study with Itzhak Perlman at Brooklyn College where she enrolled in a Masters program. In 2003 she published her first article, "The Genius of Django," for *The Walrus Magazine* which earned her a Gold National Magazine Award in Arts and Literature. She subsequently published two more pieces that also received national attention. In 2006 she was awarded a fellowship for Creative Non-Fiction at the Banff Centre where she first began writing on Gustav Mahler. *Mahler's Lament* is her first novella.

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